DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 228 CS 506 554

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TITLE Parents Helping in the Classroom. PEN 71.
INSTITUTION Primary English Teaching Association, Rozelle (Australia).
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Boards of Education; Classroom Environment; Community Resources; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Staff Role
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet answers the question "How can we best involve parents in the classroom?" at the level of the school council, school staff, and classroom teacher. Issues to be negotiated by school councils include the changing nature of Australian family structures, parents with small children at home, parents helping after school hours, encouraging participation by parents who do not normally participate, and the male role models provided by fathers helping in the classroom. Six parent workshops designed to be run by the school staff are described. Also presented are eight specific ideas for getting parents interested in helping--including formal visits, using parents' particular skills, and avoiding giving parents information overload by sending too much information home rather than giving it briefly at class meetings. Suggestions for ways that parents can help in the classroom include assisting with reading, writing, and computers, or serving as group leaders or tutors. (RS)

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WHY INVOLVE PARENTS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Parents have a clear and proper interest in the education of their children, and in recent years schools have increasingly been offering them the opportunity to become involved in all aspects of school life, including having access to and helping in the classroom. Clearly, the more involved parents become with classroom programs, the more likely they are to be well informed when they participate in school decision making. Building a strong school community is an essential ingredient in the development of schools in which effective education is seen as a joint enterprise involving parents and schools.

Fostering parental involvement in schools will provide benefits by:

- giving children a more effective learning environment, made possible through an increased adult/pupil ratio
- providing schools with extra personnel and resources
- giving parents new insights and understanding about their children, as they build bridges between home learning and school learning
- providing school councils with parents who are knowledgeable about school needs.

The question we need to ask now is not, 'Should we involve parents in the classroom?' but 'How can we best involve parents in the classroom?' In answering it, we will find that action needs to be taken at three levels: by the school council or school decision-making body, by the school staff, and by the classroom teacher.

ISSUES TO BE NEGOTIATED BY SCHOOL COUNCILS OR DECISION-MAKING BODIES

Obviously the way in which parents can be deployed effectively in school programs will depend on the nature and needs of the school community – children, parents and teachers. A number of issues will need to be discussed and resolved, some of which might be these.

♦ The need to acknowledge the changed and changing nature of family structures. In most Australian families both parents go out of the home to work for at least part of the time. We can no longer assume that mothers are the people who have time to help in the classroom. *Both* parents in a family can be encouraged to feel that it is their *role* and *responsibility* to participate in school activities, and a positive effort must be made to involve fathers in classroom programs. With some negotiation and encouragement, it may be possible for them to make a regular commitment for a short time each week.

♦ Greater involvement in classroom programs by fathers will also provide boys with role models of men who are concerned with nurturing, child care and education – fields traditionally seen as part of the female domain. Australian schools are committed to a non-sexist education. If men become more involved in school programs, they will be visibly modelling changes in traditionally ascribed sex roles, which should help promote a change to non-sexist attitudes.

♦ The need to address the problem of parents who would like to help, but have small children at home. The School Council or P & C may wish to

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make this issue a priority. With organisation, it may be possible to arrange a roster system amongst parents of young children, whereby one parent each day takes care of the small children in a pre-arranged area of the school, thus enabling these parents to help in the classroom on a regular basis. Such a program would also provide an opportunity for mothers and fathers of young children to meet each other, and might serve the secondary purpose of providing a community support group for them.

• Many parents, particularly sole parents, are unable to help during school hours. Nevertheless they may still wish to feel they are part of the school community and to participate in school activities, and their children may feel the need to see them as prominent members of the school community. So the school community needs to consider new ways of involving such parents. They may be able to assist with sporting teams out of school hours, or help with the typing and publishing of children's writing as part of the classroom writing program.

• Frequently the parents who are confident enough to assist in school programs are those who come from the more advantaged sectors of the school community. Usually children like their parents to be involved in the school program, but not all parents have the confidence. We need to be cautious that we are not widening the gap between children who are successful in school and those who are not. Accordingly schools may wish to devise programs which will involve parents who do not normally participate. These might take the form of teaching-learning sessions for parents, partly to encourage those who are less confident about helping in the classroom.

HOW CAN THE SCHOOL STAFF HELP?

It is important for any parent helping in the classroom to understand the underlying assumptions on which classroom programs are based. As a school staff, or in teaching teams, you may wish to plan a number of teaching-learning sessions for parents who are going to help. During these sessions parents will learn about the school curriculum, which will build their confidence about their ability to make a significant contribution.

These training programs can be offered to all parents, even if they are not able to help in the classroom, thus providing you with a way of informing parents about the way you hope children will learn, and perhaps encouraging some of them to become more involved with the school. Some ideas for what we might call Parent Workshops now follow.

Workshop I

Here is an easy way of helping parents understand how language learning occurs.

- Put parents in groups of five.
- Ask them to talk about something they have learnt to do recently, e.g. wind surfing.
- Ask them to describe the steps they went through in learning this skill.
- When they have all had a turn, ask them to see if they can find some common steps they went through in learning the new skill.
- Get feedback from the whole group.

You will probably find that they went through stages like the ones listed below. Notice how these stages match up with 'The Conditions of Literacy Learning' set out in PEN 65 by Bouffler and Bean, which are noted here in brackets.

1 Motive, need, puzzlement, problem to solve, desire to solve it *(responsibility, expectation, engagement).*

2 Input: talking is often involved, information sought from those who know *(demonstration, immersion, scaffolding, engagement).*

3 Experience, trial and error, having a go *(responsibility, approximation, practice, engagement).*

4 Feedback, and/or sharing, and/or expert input, and/or repetition and immersion *(practice, feedback, responsibility, sometimes scaffolding, engagement).*

5 Understanding and satisfaction, and/or sharing with others – celebrating.

You can now make links between the way children learn to talk and the way they learn to read and write. Let's take writing and spelling first: here are some discussion points.

Responsibility/Expectation
When your children learned to talk, what happened? You had absolute faith in their ability to

learn to talk. Have the same belief in their ability to learn to spell correctly. Confidence is important because it enables children to keep trying even when they make mistakes.

Engagement/Demonstration
Your children watched you using talk to make sense of the world. If they watch you write whilst you explain the reasons for writing, they will see that writing serves real purposes in life.

Immersion/Modelling
Your children attempted to talk because talking brought rewards and gave them power amongst others. Getting children to write letters, shopping lists, birthday cards and party plans will show them the value of their writing.

Approximation/Practice
Your children attempted to talk before they could do so correctly. Let children try to spell for themselves, for without experience learning is difficult. Through experimenting they learn how the spelling system works. First attempts may be scribble or the representation of one word with one letter. 'How are you?' may be written 'H R U'.

Feedback
When your children were learning to talk you didn't correct their mistakes; instead you replied to their messages using the correct speech forms. Do the same thing with writing. Write messages back to your children using the correct spelling of words they have used. In this way we can correct mistakes without reprimanding children for being wrong. When children ask if they are correct, reward what they get right, e.g. 'Good, you have four out of five letters right, but this letter should be an e.'

Practice
When your children were learning to talk they practised constantly, even when there was no-one to listen and correct the mistakes. Encourage your children to write frequently and recognize that mistakes are part of learning something new.

Now here are some discussion points showing how you can make links to the way children learn to read. Remind parents that they probably noticed the following things when their children were learning to read.

Engagement/Modelling
The children watched the print and pictures carefully as you read to them.

Approximation/Practice
As they become more familiar with the text, reading-like behaviour took place. The children told the story as though they were reading, using clues from the pictures and knowledge of the story to retell the story. At this stage they were probably not matching what they were 'reading' to the print.

Immersion/Responsibility
With continued immersion in the story, approximation and practice at retelling and talking about the story, the match between the retelling and the print became closer. Eventually the children matched the print to what they were reading. At this stage their fluency may have deteriorated, as they learnt the significance of being able to read each word.

Practice
With further practice the children regained fluency and read the story with expression.

Feedback/Engagement
As the children began to identify words, they probably began to recognize different letters and letter-sound correspondences too. With continued practice, immersion and feedback, this knowledge increased until they were able to use their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to decode unknown words.

Workshop II

If parents are going to be involved with children who are reading, it is important for them to understand which strategies support proficient reading. Here's one way of helping them to do so.

- Give parents a piece of text to read which will present some difficulties for them as readers, and ask them to read it.
- Get them to discuss in small groups how they extracted meaning from the text.
- Discuss with the whole group how they used information in the head, as well as on the page, to help them make sense of the text.
- Discuss how they monitored their own making of meaning.
- Ask them what strategies they used when they lost meaning. Discuss the validity of strategies such as:
  - ~ re-reading
  - ~ reading on
  - ~ missing out the word
  - ~ self-correcting.

Having discussed the reading strategies parents use themselves, you can help them develop a procedural format that they can use when they are working with children. Here's one example.

GUIDE FOR ACTION WHEN HELPING CHILDREN READ

If children ...

make a mistake and correct the error...

- offer praise or support for their self-correction.

come to a word they don't know and pause...

- wait to give them time for problem solving.
- If they're successful, encourage them to read on to maintain meaning.
- If meaning is lost and the word is likely to be known, then ask them to go back to the beginning of the sentence and take another 'run' at it
  or
  ask them to predict a word which begins with the correct letter and would make sense
  or
  ask a question which will give a clue to the meaning, e.g. 'How do you think Johnny feels – angry?'
- If the word is not likely to be known, then say it quickly and encourage reading on to maintain fluency.

make a mistake which does not make sense...

- wait to see if self-correction occurs and offer praise if it does.
- If there is no self-correction, ask, 'Does that make sense?'
  or
  ask a question which will give a clue to the meaning of the sentence, e.g. 'What do you think is going to happen?' or 'Where will he go to catch the train?'

make a mistake which does make sense...

- do nothing until the children have finished reading.
- When they have finished, go back to the word and say 'You said this word was _____; it made sense but it begins (or ends) with the letter _, so what do you think it could be?'
- You may wish to discuss the structure of the word with the children and see if they can think of any other words with a similar pattern.

Workshop III

This session is designed to help parents working with older children to focus on different ways of promoting class discussion about the interpretation of texts.

Engage the parents in some group discussions about adult fiction. Short stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, or *A Lamp in a Window* by Truman Capote, should provoke some lively exchanges of opinion. By discussing such

texts themselves, parents can be led to see how to promote discussion amongst children by encouraging them to:

- predict
- reflect
- question the text
- adopt stances
- take different perspectives.

Workshop IV

Asking parents to read along with children can often help those who are able to decode effectively but lack fluency in their reading. Such children frequently have difficulty in understanding complex written texts, because their lack of rhythm and automaticity makes it hard for them to give enough attention to the meaning of what they are reading (Allington 1983). Children in the middle grades often fall into this category. An improvement in fluency will enable these children to concentrate better on the meaning of the text (Martin 1972).

You may like to hold a workshop and organize a group of parents to work regularly with such children on a one-to-one basis. If so, you will need to show parents how to:

- encourage each child to select material which is really involving and interesting
- read rhythmically, pausing in places which encourage the child to chunk reading effectively.

Poetry, picture books and rhythmic texts naturally encourage the chunking of what's being read. Some useful books here are:

Where the Sidewalk Ends by Shel Silverstein
In the Garden of Bad Things by Doug McLeod
Everlasting Circle by Ted Greenwood
In the Night, Still Dark by Richard Lewis
Sounds of Language Readers by Bill Martin Jr
The Sea People by Jörg Müller and Jörg Steiner
Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox.

Parents can also help build up a library of read-along materials on tape. It is important to select good quality literature for this purpose. Using these read-along tapes, weaker readers can read good quality literature which would be too difficult for them to read by themselves. Children who are afraid of reading 'long' books can be bridged into reading more difficult ones. At the same time they have the opportunity to read and hear 'literary' language, which will build up their 'in-head' knowledge for further reading.

Workshop V

Parents who are going to work as group leaders in the middle and upper primary school may need a workshop to help them understand how to help children read informational texts. The Erica Model set out by Morris and Stewart-Dore (1984) is most useful here. It shows how we can improve children's understanding of factual materials by providing them with strategies to prepare for and think through texts, and to organize and translate information gained from those texts. Many parents of middle and upper primary children would be interested in attending a workshop on this topic.

Workshop VI

Parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds provide a wealth of knowledge about other cultures and languages. It is important for them to be seen as valued resources in the school, and they can be encouraged to share their knowledge of other cultures and languages with the children. If they can be valued *because* of their cultural differences, they can make a major contribution to school learning whilst themselves gaining confidence in a new culture. They can be an enormous help in introducing foreign languages as a legitimate part of the primary curriculum. Learning a second language develops our understanding of our first language, and Australian children can only be advantaged by having the opportunity to learn one.

In order to provide support for these parents, you might wish to show them how to use the following strategies as they work with children:

- using situational contexts to support the learning of a second language, e.g. cooking
- using story telling or well-known tales common to both languages, e.g. 'Little Red Riding Hood'
- using role play and drama to develop control of certain patterns of language, e.g. greetings.

IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

Getting Started

- Creating a warm and inviting classroom atmosphere will encourage parents to come into the classroom to see what the children are doing. They will feel they are always welcome to join in classroom activities, and they can share the reflecting and celebrating you do with the class whenever you complete a unit of work. For example, a

Grade 2 teacher developed a language unit of work on 'Food Glorious Food'. To complete it she held a banquet. Each child wrote a formal invitation asking an adult to come as their guest to the banquet. Parents, children and the teacher all had a wonderful time.

• Through a parent meeting early in the year we can explain our beliefs about learning. During this meeting we can make clear our positive expectations about parental involvement and discuss how it might be negotiated. Further information about parents' occupations, skills and interests can be gathered at the same time. This first meeting is best kept convivial. Try to enable parents to leave feeling:

- ~ they had a good time
- ~ they understand how you intend running the classroom
- ~ they have learnt something about the school curriculum
- ~ they are comfortable talking to you.

• Some schools send home so much information that parents get information overload. So...

TRY TO KEEP NOTICES SHORT AND CLEAR. GIVE THE INFORMATION AT THE CLASS MEETING.

• Parents can be involved early in the year by inviting them for interviews on an informal basis. Instead of having parent interviews on one night, they can be held informally throughout the term. During these interviews parents can be invited to participate in the classroom program. *A personal approach is always more likely to be successful than a general invitation issued through the newsletter.* Try to be specific in your requests, for by this time you will know what types of activities each parent is likely to feel confident with. You will know what areas of expertise they have to offer as a resource in different areas of the curriculum. Remember, people are usually willing to help when they feel they have something to contribute, and when they feel their help is needed to make things work.

• Try to plan your program carefully so that you can see exactly where you need extra help in the classroom. You may, for instance, have few musical or artistic talents; if so, help with these programs will be particularly valuable. Because language development is so closely linked with all school learning, most teachers will benefit from parental support with the language program. Children usually develop their language skills more rapidly when there is a high adult-child ratio. Maths programs which are experientially based and involve a lot of experimentation often require assistance from adults.

• It's increasingly common for both parents to have jobs, and so parents provide a huge resource of work skills which can help teachers plan their classroom programs – particularly in subjects like social science, science, health, physical education and computer education. This is another good reason for teachers to get to know parents and establish a register of their skills.

• There will always be some parents who are unable to actively participate in school programs, and it's important for them to feel they are kept in touch with the work their children are doing. As well, we don't want their children to feel disadvantaged because they are unable to help in the classroom. Teachers may need to meet these parents on a more regular basis to ensure that they understand the programs in which their children are engaged. If this is not possible, personal letters can be written.

• Many K-3 teachers have developed strategies for effectively involving parents in their classroom program. However, middle and upper primary teachers seem less likely to do so, although much school failure occurs at the point where children are in transition between early childhood and middle primary, or between upper primary and high school. Parents can be used as group leaders in the middle and upper primary school to help support teachers as they develop programs which include group talk and discussion. Such programs can help children cope with the new learning demands of the upper primary curriculum. If the adult-child ratio in the classroom is reduced, children are more likely to have an opportunity to clarify concepts which are confusing them.

Different Ways of Involving Parents in your Classroom

PARENTS HELPING WITH READING

Think carefully about the most effective way of deploying parents. Many teachers use parents to listen to children reading. However, it may be more effective to use parents as group leaders to read and discuss different texts with the children, leaving you free to listen to children reading individually. In this way you will have the opportunity to carefully monitor the strategies the children are using as they read. You will be able to check to see

f they are using prior knowledge to make predict-ons, if they employ graphophonic strategies effect-vely, and if they check to see if what is read makes sense. You can discuss their reading with them to see how they respond to literature, and whether or not they can interpret what they have read, making links to other knowledge they have.

If you decide to involve parents in this way, you will need to:

- discuss with them different ways of reading stories aloud
- give them question starters to promote oral discussion, e.g.
  What if ...?
  How do you think ... would feel?
  Have you ever felt like that? When?
  Why do you think ...?
- help them understand the value of discussing different opinions about a text, without always focussing on literal interpretations
- show them how to focus on different concepts of print when they are reading to young children, e.g. moving from left to right; the words tell the story, not the pictures.

If parents prefer to tell stories rather than read them, they may need some help in learning story-telling techniques. *Thereby Hangs a Tale*, written by Mem Fox, offers many useful strategies for learning these techniques.

In middle and upper primary classes children can be given time to prepare oral story reading and then read to the class. Afterwards parents can lead small groups, activating discussion of the story and ensuring that the children stay on task.

Grandparents might be used for story-reading and story-telling activities when parents are not available. You may wish to organize a regular day on which grandparents can be involved – either weekly or monthly, according to your needs and the availability of grandparents.

Children in middle and upper primary school need to devote considerable time to discussing and interpreting the texts they read. Obviously the more interactions children have as they discuss the meanings they make of a text, the more thoughtful they will become as readers and thinkers. Parents can be used as group leaders to encourage such discussion amongst older children, thereby increasing the number of interactions each child can have.

PARENTS HELPING WITH WRITING

Many teachers currently use parents to help conference with children as they compose their own written texts. You may find this more effective if you encourage parents to be troubleshooters, ensuring that children stay on task by helping them deal with the minor problems of writing, such as spelling or what to write next. This will leave you free to hold in-depth conferences with children, during which time you can really extend the children and focus on areas of their writing which need further development.

Parents who write frequently in the course of their occupations can help by showing children how writers all have different strategies for writing, and how writing changes according to its topic, purpose and audience. Ask these parents to bring some of their work-associated writing into class. Get them to discuss how they went about each of the writing tasks, explaining clearly the knowledge and information they sought or made use of. If they are willing, ask them to compose in front of the class, showing the children how they would set about a writing task which, for them, is common practice.

Other parents may be able to provide resources related to publishing written materials. Ask these parents to share their knowledge with the class. Parents who are willing can assist with typing and publishing class-made books.

PARENTS HELPING WITH COMPUTERS

Many parents are very comfortable with computers. Use them as group leaders to engage children in tasks to be completed on the computer or word processor.

Whenever possible, try to ensure that these are inter-active tasks which require the children to negotiate with each other, make judgements and substantiate their choices. Part of the group leader's job is to ensure that this process of negotiation is maintained.

PARENTS AS GROUP LEADERS

Parents can be involved in all subjects where children work in groups. Adult supervision is likely to ensure that children stay on task and to enhance the quality of group interactions.

Parents acting as group leaders can also keep records which will make the teacher's task easier. Many of the topics dealt with in science, social science or maths will provide experiences with which parents are familiar, e.g. measurement in maths. So a great deal of preparation is often unnecessary, because parents will feel quite comfortable without it.

On other occasions, where parents have special expertise in a topic, they may be willing to take responsibility for organizing activities which draw on their expertise.

Parent Tutor Programs

You may wish to consider setting up a special Parent Tutor Program for parents of children who are not succeeding with literacy tasks, or parents who are willing to help other children who are failing. Such programs have been found to be very effective in New Zealand (McNaughton et al. 1981), where parents have been used as reading tutors, and in Canberra (Kemp 1985a, b), where parents have been shown how to tutor their children in writing. In both of these programs parents have been given initial training sessions, with ongoing support provided through monitoring of progress by the organizers. Simple procedures have been used, based on giving parents an understanding of the strategies used by proficient readers and writers. In Canberra, providing parents with a plan for editing the message, punctuation and spelling has been found to be most helpful; see McIntyre (1987) and Kemp (1985b).

Using the suggestions outlined in this PEN, the school staff will be able to devise their own Parent Tutor Program. It might include:

- sessions which enable parents to understand the processing and strategies used by effective readers and writers
- procedural plans to provide guidance for parents as they tutor children, e.g. the 'Guide for action when helping children read'
- criteria to help parents select reading materials for the children they tutor, e.g.
  - ~ meaningfulness/interest
  - ~ match between pictures and text
  - ~ vividness and richness of language
  - ~ cohesion of the text
  - ~ predictability
  - ~ length of book
  - ~ plot/theme/tension.

CONCLUSION

It is important that parent assistance in classrooms be viewed as a valuable school resource. We are developing a climate where education is seen as a joint enterprise between parents and the school. If we want parents, as part of the school community, to be informed decision-makers, it is our responsibility to help them understand the curriculum through the classroom program. A mutually rewarding way of fostering this understanding is to encourage parents to assist with teaching-learning activities. This can provide support and extra resources for the classroom teacher, whilst allowing parents the opportunity to become involved with their own children's learning. However, we must proceed with caution. If the only parents who are able to participate in such programs are those who are themselves well educated, we may be increasing the literacy gap between those children who perform effectively in school and those who do not. We must make every effort to encourage and persuade most parents, both fathers and mothers, that their participation in classroom programs is an important and valued part of their children's education.

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